

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



PERCY AND PADFOOT

Harry was the first to awake in his dormitory next morning. He lay for a moment watching dust swirl in the chink of sunlight falling through the gap in his four-poster's hangings and savored the thought that it was Saturday. The first week of term seemed to have dragged on forever, like one gigantic History of Magic lesson.

Judging by the sleepy silence and the freshly minted look of that beam of sunlight, it was just after daybreak. He pulled open the curtains around his bed, got up, and started to dress. The only sound apart from the distant twittering of birds was the slow, deep breathing of his fellow Gryffindors. He opened his schoolbag carefully, pulled out parchment and quill, and headed out of the dormitory for the common room.

Making straight for his favorite squashy old armchair beside the now extinct fire, Harry settled himself down comfortably and unrolled his parchment while looking around the room. The detritus of crumpled-up bits of parchment, old Gobstones, empty ingredient jars, and candy wrappers that usually covered the common room at the end of each day was gone, as were all Hermione's elf hats. Wondering vaguely how many elves had now been set free whether they wanted to be or not, Harry uncorked his ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and then held it suspended an inch above the smooth yellowish surface of his parchment, thinking hard. . . . But after a minute or so

he found himself staring into the empty grate, at a complete loss for what to say.

He could now appreciate how hard it had been for Ron and Hermione to write him letters over the summer. How was he supposed to tell Sirius everything that had happened over the past week and pose all the questions he was burning to ask without giving potential letter-thieves a lot of information he did not want them to have?

He sat quite motionless for a while, gazing into the fireplace, then, finally coming to a decision, he dipped his quill into the ink bottle once more and set it resolutely upon the parchment.

Dear Snuffles,

Hope you're okay, the first week back here's been terrible, I'm really glad it's the weekend.

We've got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Umbridge. She's nearly as nice as your mum. I'm writing because that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened again last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge.

We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly.

Best,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Harry', written in dark ink.

Harry reread this letter several times, trying to see it from the point of view of an outsider. He could not see how they would know what he was talking about — or who he was talking to — just from reading this letter. He did hope Sirius would pick up the hint about Hagrid and tell them when he might be back: Harry did not want to ask directly in case it drew too much attention to what Hagrid might be up to while he was not at Hogwarts.

Considering it was a very short letter it had taken a long time to write; sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it,

and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. Sealing the parchment carefully he climbed through the portrait hole and headed off for the Owlery.

“I would *not* go that way if I were you,” said Nearly Headless Nick, drifting disconcertingly through a wall just ahead of him as he walked down the passage. “Peeves is planning an amusing joke on the next person to pass the bust of Paracelsus halfway down the corridor.”

“Does it involve Paracelsus falling on top of the person’s head?” asked Harry.

“Funnily enough, it *does*,” said Nearly Headless Nick in a bored voice. “Subtlety has never been Peeves’s strong point. I’m off to try and find the Bloody Baron. . . . He might be able to put a stop to it. . . . See you, Harry . . .”

“Yeah, ’bye,” said Harry and instead of turning right, he turned left, taking a longer but safer route up to the Owlery. His spirits rose as he walked past window after window showing brilliantly blue sky; he had training later, he would be back on the Quidditch pitch at last —

Something brushed his ankles. He looked down and saw the caretaker’s skeletal gray cat, Mrs. Norris, slinking past him. She turned lamplike yellow eyes upon him for a moment before disappearing behind a statue of Wilfred the Wistful.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Harry called after her. She had the unmistakable air of a cat that was off to report to her boss, yet Harry could not see why; he was perfectly entitled to walk up to the Owlery on a Saturday morning.

The sun was high in the sky now and when Harry entered the Owlery the glassless windows dazzled his eyes; thick silvery beams of sunlight crisscrossed the circular room in which hundreds of owls nestled on rafters, a little restless in the early morning light, some clearly just returned from hunting. The straw-covered floor crunched a little as he stepped across tiny animal bones, craning his neck for a sight of Hedwig.

“There you are,” he said, spotting her somewhere near the very top of the vaulted ceiling. “Get down here, I’ve got a letter for you.”

With a low hoot she stretched her great white wings and soared down onto his shoulder.

“Right, I know this says ‘Snuffles’ on the outside,” he told her, giving her the letter to clasp in her beak and, without knowing exactly why, whispering, “but it’s for Sirius, okay?”

She blinked her amber eyes once and he took that to mean that she understood.

“Safe flight, then,” said Harry and he carried her to one of the windows; with a moment’s pressure on his arm Hedwig took off into the blindingly bright sky. He watched her until she became a tiny black speck and vanished, then switched his gaze to Hagrid’s hut, clearly visible from this window, and just as clearly uninhabited, the chimney smokeless, the curtains drawn.

The treetops of the Forbidden Forest swayed in a light breeze. Harry watched them, savoring the fresh air on his face, thinking about Quidditch later . . . and then he saw it. A great, reptilian winged horse, just like the ones pulling the Hogwarts carriages, with leathery black wings spread wide like a pterodactyl’s, rose up out of the trees like a grotesque, giant bird. It soared in a great circle and then plunged once more into the trees. The whole thing had happened so quickly Harry could hardly believe what he had seen, except that his heart was hammering madly.

The Owlery door opened behind him. He leapt in shock, and turning quickly, saw Cho Chang holding a letter and a parcel in her hands.

“Hi,” said Harry automatically.

“Oh . . . hi,” she said breathlessly. “I didn’t think anyone would be up here this early. . . . I only remembered five minutes ago, it’s my mum’s birthday.”

She held up the parcel.

“Right,” said Harry. His brain seemed to have jammed. He wanted to say something funny and interesting, but the memory of that terrible winged horse was fresh in his mind.

“Nice day,” he said, gesturing to the windows. His insides seemed to shrivel with embarrassment. The weather. He was talking about the *weather*. . . .

“Yeah,” said Cho, looking around for a suitable owl. “Good Quidditch conditions. I haven’t been out all week, have you?”

“No,” said Harry.

Cho had selected one of the school barn owls. She coaxed it down onto her arm where it held out an obliging leg so that she could attach the parcel.

“Hey, has Gryffindor got a new Keeper yet?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s my friend Ron Weasley, d’you know him?”

“The Tornado-hater?” said Cho rather coolly. “Is he any good?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “I think so. I didn’t see his tryout, though, I was in detention.”

Cho looked up, the parcel only half-attached to the owl’s legs.

“That Umbridge woman’s foul,” she said in a low voice. “Putting you in detention just because you told the truth about how — how — how he died. Everyone heard about it, it was all over the school. You were really brave standing up to her like that.”

Harry’s insides reinflated so rapidly he felt as though he might actually float a few inches off the dropping-strewn floor. Who cared about a stupid flying horse, Cho thought he had been really brave. . . . For a moment he considered accidentally-on-purpose showing her his cut hand as he helped her tie her parcel onto her owl. . . . But the very instant that this thrilling thought occurred, the Owlery door opened again.

Filch, the caretaker, came wheezing into the room. There were purple patches on his sunken, veined cheeks, his jowls were aquiver and his thin gray hair disheveled; he had obviously run here. Mrs. Norris came trotting at his heels, gazing up at the owls overhead and mewling hungrily. There was a restless shifting of wings from above, and a large brown owl snapped his beak in a menacing fashion.

“Aha!” said Filch, taking a flat-footed step toward Harry, his pouchy cheeks trembling with anger. “I’ve had a tip-off that you are intending to place a massive order for Dungbombs!”

Harry folded his arms and stared at the caretaker.

“Who told you I was ordering Dungbombs?”

Cho was looking from Harry to Filch, also frowning; the barn owl on her arm, tired of standing on one leg, gave an admonitory hoot but she ignored it.

“I have my sources,” said Filch in a self-satisfied hiss. “Now hand over whatever it is you’re sending.”

Feeling immensely thankful that he had not dawdled in posting off the letter, Harry said, “I can’t, it’s gone.”

“Gone?” said Filch, his face contorting with rage.

“Gone,” said Harry calmly.

Filch opened his mouth furiously, mouthed for a few seconds, then raked Harry’s robes with his eyes. “How do I know you haven’t got it in your pocket?”

“Because —”

“I saw him send it,” said Cho angrily.

Filch rounded on her.

“You saw him — ?”

“That’s right, I saw him,” she said fiercely.

There was a moment’s pause in which Filch glared at Cho and Cho glared right back, then the caretaker turned and shuffled back toward the door. He stopped with his hand on the handle and looked back at Harry.

“If I get so much as a whiff of a Dungbomb . . .”

He stumped off down the stairs. Mrs. Norris cast a last longing look at the owls and followed him.

Harry and Cho looked at each other.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“No problem,” said Cho, finally fixing the parcel to the barn owl’s other leg, her face slightly pink. “You *weren’t* ordering Dungbombs, were you?”

“No,” said Harry.

“I wonder why he thought you were, then?” she said, as she carried the owl to the window.

Harry shrugged; he was quite as mystified by that as she was, though, oddly, it was not bothering him very much at the moment.

They left the Owlery together. At the entrance of a corridor that led toward the west wing of the castle, Cho said, “I’m going this way. Well, I’ll . . . I’ll see you around, Harry.”

“Yeah . . . see you.”

She smiled at him and departed. He walked on, feeling quietly elated. He had managed to have an entire conversation with her and not embarrassed himself once. . . . *You were really brave standing up to her like that.* . . . She had called him brave. . . . She did not hate him for being alive. . . .

Of course, she had preferred Cedric, he knew that. . . . Though if he’d only asked her to the ball before Cedric had, things might have turned out differently. . . . She had seemed sincerely sorry that she had to refuse when Harry had asked her. . . .

“Morning,” Harry said brightly to Ron and Hermione, joining them at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

“What are you looking so pleased about?” said Ron, eyeing Harry in surprise.

“Erm . . . Quidditch later,” said Harry happily, pulling a large platter of bacon and eggs toward him.

“Oh . . . yeah . . .” said Ron. He put down the bit of toast he was eating and took a large swig of pumpkin juice. Then he said, “Listen . . . you don’t fancy going out a bit earlier with me, do you? Just to — er — give me some practice before training? So I can, you know, get my eye in a bit . . .”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry.

“Look, I don’t think you should,” said Hermione seriously, “you’re both really behind on homework as it —”

But she broke off; the morning post was arriving and, as usual, the *Daily Prophet* was soaring toward her in the beak of a screech owl, which landed perilously close to the sugar bowl and held out a leg; Hermione pushed a Knut into its leather pouch, took the newspaper, and scanned the front page critically as the owl took off again.

“Anything interesting?” said Ron; Harry smiled — he knew Ron was keen to get her off the subject of homework.

“No,” she sighed, “just some guff about the bass player in the Weird Sisters getting married . . .”

She opened the paper and disappeared behind it. Harry devoted himself to another helping of eggs and bacon; Ron was staring up at the high windows, looking slightly preoccupied.

“Wait a moment,” said Hermione suddenly. “Oh no . . . Sirius!”

“What’s happened?” said Harry, and he snatched at the paper so violently that it ripped down the middle so that he and Hermione were holding half each.

“‘*The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer . . . blah blah blah . . . is currently hiding in London!*’” Hermione read from her half in an anguished whisper.

“Lucius Malfoy, I’ll bet anything,” said Harry in a low, furious voice. “He *did* recognize Sirius on the platform . . .”

“What?” said Ron, looking alarmed. “You didn’t say —”

“Shh!” said the other two.

“‘. . . *Ministry warns Wizarding community that Black is very dangerous . . . killed thirteen people . . . broke out of Azkaban . . .*’ the usual rubbish,” Hermione concluded, laying down her half of the paper and looking fearfully at Harry and Ron. “Well, he just won’t be able to leave the house

again, that's all," she whispered. "Dumbledore did warn him not to."

Harry looked down glumly at the bit of the *Prophet* he had torn off. Most of the page was devoted to an advertisement for Madame Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, which was apparently having a sale.

"Hey!" he said, flattening it down so Hermione and Ron could both see it. "Look at this!"

"I've got all the robes I want," said Ron.

"No," said Harry, "look . . . this little piece here . . ."

Ron and Hermione bent closer to read it; the item was barely an inch long and placed right at the bottom of a column. It was headlined:

TRESPASS AT MINISTRY

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of number two, Laburnum Gardens, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on 31st August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watchwizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o'clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

"Sturgis Podmore?" said Ron slowly, "but he's that bloke who looks like his head's been thatched, isn't he? He's one of the Ord —"

"Ron, *shh!*" said Hermione, casting a terrified look around them.

"Six months in Azkaban!" whispered Harry, shocked. "Just for trying to get through a door!"

"Don't be silly, it wasn't just for trying to get through a door — what on earth was he doing at the Ministry of Magic at one o'clock in the morning?" breathed Hermione.

“D’you reckon he was doing something for the Order?” Ron muttered.

“Wait a moment . . .” said Harry slowly. “Sturgis was supposed to come and see us off, remember?”

The other two looked at him.

“Yeah, he was supposed to be part of our guard going to King’s Cross, remember? And Moody was all annoyed because he didn’t turn up, so that doesn’t seem like he was supposed to be on a job for them, does it?”

“Well, maybe they didn’t expect him to get caught,” said Hermione.

“It could be a frame-up!” Ron exclaimed excitedly. “No — listen!” he went on, dropping his voice dramatically at the threatening look on Hermione’s face. “The Ministry suspects he’s one of Dumbledore’s lot so — I dunno — they *lured* him to the Ministry, and he wasn’t trying to get through a door at all! Maybe they’ve just made something up to get him!”

There was a pause while Harry and Hermione considered this. Harry thought it seemed far-fetched; Hermione, on the other hand, looked rather impressed and said, “Do you know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that were true.”

She folded up her half of the newspaper thoughtfully. When Harry laid down his knife and fork she seemed to come out of a reverie.

“Right, well, I think we should tackle that essay for Sprout on Self-Fertilizing Shrubs first, and if we’re lucky we’ll be able to start McGonagall’s *Inanimatus Conjurus* before lunch . . .”

Harry felt a small twinge of guilt at the thought of the pile of homework awaiting him upstairs, but the sky was a clear, exhilarating blue, and he had not been on his Firebolt all week. . . .

“I mean, we can do it tonight,” said Ron, as he and Harry walked down the sloping lawns toward the Quidditch pitch, their broomsticks over their shoulders, Hermione’s dire warnings that they would fail all their O.W.L.s still ringing in their ears. “And we’ve got tomorrow. She gets too worked up about work, that’s her trouble . . .” There was a pause and he added, in a slightly more anxious tone, “D’you think she meant it when she said we

weren't copying from her?"

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. "Still, this is important too, we've got to practice if we want to stay on the Quidditch team . . ."

"Yeah, that's right," said Ron in a heartened tone. "And we *have* got plenty of time to do it all . . ."

Harry glanced over to his right as they approached the Quidditch pitch, to where the trees of the Forbidden Forest were swaying darkly. Nothing flew out of them; the sky was empty but for a few distant owls fluttering around the Owlery Tower. He had enough to worry about; the flying horse wasn't doing him any harm: He pushed it out of his mind.

They collected balls from the cupboard in the changing room and set to work, Ron guarding the three tall goalposts, Harry playing Chaser and trying to get the Quaffle past Ron. Harry thought Ron was pretty good; he blocked three-quarters of the goals Harry attempted to put past him and played better the longer they practiced. After a couple of hours they returned to the school, where they ate lunch, during which Hermione made it quite clear that she thought they were irresponsible, then returned to the Quidditch pitch for the real training session. All their teammates but Angelina were already in the changing room when they entered.

"All right, Ron?" said George, winking at him.

"Yeah," said Ron, who had become quieter and quieter all the way down to the pitch.

"Ready to show us all up, Ickle Prefect?" said Fred, emerging tousle-haired from the neck of his Quidditch robes, a slightly malicious grin on his face.

"Shut up," said Ron, stony-faced, pulling on his own team robes for the first time. They fitted him well considering they had been Oliver Wood's, who was rather broader in the shoulder.

"Okay everyone," said Angelina, entering from the Captain's office, already changed. "Let's get to it; Alicia and Fred, if you can just bring the ball crate out for us. Oh, and there are a couple of people out there watching but I want you to just ignore them, all right?"

Something in her would-be casual voice made Harry think he might know who the uninvited spectators were, and sure enough, when they left the changing room for the bright sunlight of the pitch it was to a storm of catcalls and jeers from the Slytherin Quidditch team and assorted hangers-on, who were grouped halfway up the empty stands and whose voices echoed loudly around the stadium.

“What’s that Weasley’s riding?” Malfoy called in his sneering drawl. “Why would anyone put a Flying Charm on a moldy old log like that?”

Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson guffawed and shrieked with laughter. Ron mounted his broom and kicked off from the ground and Harry followed him, watching his ears turn red from behind.

“Ignore them,” he said, accelerating to catch up with Ron. “We’ll see who’s laughing after we play them . . .”

“Exactly the attitude I want, Harry,” said Angelina approvingly, soaring around them with the Quaffle under her arm and slowing to hover on the spot in front of her airborne team. “Okay everyone, we’re going to start with some passes just to warm up, the whole team please —”

“Hey, Johnson, what’s with that hairstyle anyway?” shrieked Pansy Parkinson from below. “Why would anyone want to look like they’ve got worms coming out of their head?”

Angelina swept her long braided hair out of her face and said calmly, “Spread out, then, and let’s see what we can do . . .”

Harry reversed away from the others to the far side of the pitch. Ron fell back toward the opposite goal. Angelina raised the Quaffle with one hand and threw it hard to Fred, who passed to George, who passed to Harry, who passed to Ron, who dropped it.

The Slytherins, led by Malfoy, roared and screamed with laughter. Ron, who had pelted toward the ground to catch the Quaffle before it landed, pulled out of the dive untidily, so that he slipped sideways on his broom, and returned to playing height, blushing. Harry saw Fred and George exchange looks, but uncharacteristically neither of them said anything, for which he was

grateful.

“Pass it on, Ron,” called Angelina, as though nothing had happened.

Ron threw the Quaffle to Alicia, who passed back to Harry, who passed to George. . . .

“Hey, Potter, how’s your scar feeling?” called Malfoy. “Sure you don’t need a lie-down? It must be, what, a whole week since you were in the hospital wing, that’s a record for you, isn’t it?”

Fred passed to Angelina; she reverse passed to Harry, who had not been expecting it, but caught it in the very tips of his fingers and passed it quickly to Ron, who lunged for it and missed by inches.

“Come on now, Ron,” said Angelina crossly, as Ron dived for the ground again, chasing the Quaffle. “Pay attention.”

It would have been hard to say whether Ron’s face or the Quaffle was a deeper scarlet when he returned again to playing height. Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team were howling with laughter.

On his third attempt, Ron caught the Quaffle; perhaps out of relief he passed it on so enthusiastically that it soared straight through Katie’s outstretched hands and hit her hard in the face.

“Sorry!” Ron groaned, zooming forward to see whether he had done any damage.

“Get back in position, she’s fine!” barked Angelina. “But as you’re passing to a teammate, do *try* not to knock her off her broom, won’t you? We’ve got Bludgers for that!”

Katie’s nose was bleeding. Down below the Slytherins were stamping their feet and jeering. Fred and George converged on Katie.

“Here, take this,” Fred told her, handing her something small and purple from out of his pocket. “It’ll clear it up in no time.”

“All right,” called Angelina, “Fred, George, go and get your bats and a Bludger; Ron, get up to the goalposts, Harry, release the Snitch when I say so. We’re going to aim for Ron’s goal, obviously.”

Harry zoomed off after the twins to fetch the Snitch.

“Ron’s making a right pig’s ear of things, isn’t he?” muttered George, as the three of them landed at the crate containing the balls and opened it to extract one of the Bludgers and the Snitch.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry. “He was fine when I was practicing with him this morning.”

“Yeah, well, I hope he hasn’t peaked too soon,” said Fred gloomily.

They returned to the air. When Angelina blew her whistle, Harry released the Snitch and Fred and George let fly the Bludger; from that moment on, Harry was barely aware of what the others were doing. It was his job to recapture the tiny fluttering golden ball that was worth a hundred and fifty points to the Seeker’s team and doing so required enormous speed and skill. He accelerated, rolling and swerving in and out of the Chasers, the warm autumn air whipping his face and the distant yells of the Slytherins so much meaningless roaring in his ears. . . . But too soon, the whistle brought him to a halt again.

“Stop — *stop* — STOP!” screamed Angelina. “Ron — you’re not covering your middle post!”

Harry looked around at Ron, who was hovering in front of the left-hand hoop, leaving the other two completely unprotected.

“Oh . . . sorry . . .”

“You keep shifting around while you’re watching the Chasers!” said Angelina. “Either stay in center position until you have to move to defend a hoop, or else circle the hoops, but don’t drift vaguely off to one side, that’s how you let in the last three goals!”

“Sorry . . .” Ron repeated, his red face shining like a beacon against the bright blue sky.

“And Katie, can’t you do something about that nosebleed?”

“It’s just getting worse!” said Katie thickly, attempting to stem the flow with her sleeve.

Harry glanced around at Fred, who was looking anxious and checking his pockets. He saw Fred pull out something purple, examine it for a second, and then look around at Katie, evidently horrorstruck.

“Well, let’s try again,” said Angelina. She was ignoring the Slytherins, who had now set up a chant of “*Gryffindor are losers, Gryffindor are losers,*” but there was a certain rigidity about her seat on the broom nevertheless.

This time they had been flying for barely three minutes when Angelina’s whistle sounded. Harry, who had just sighted the Snitch circling the opposite goalpost, pulled up feeling distinctly aggrieved.

“What now?” he said impatiently to Alicia, who was nearest.

“Katie,” she said shortly.

Harry turned and saw Angelina, Fred, and George all flying as fast as they could toward Katie. Harry and Alicia sped toward her too. It was plain that Angelina had stopped training just in time; Katie was now chalk-white and covered in blood.

“She needs the hospital wing,” said Angelina.

“We’ll take her,” said Fred. “She — er — might have swallowed a Blood Blisterpod by mistake —”

“Well, there’s no point continuing with no Beaters and a Chaser gone,” said Angelina glumly, as Fred and George zoomed off toward the castle supporting Katie between them. “Come on, let’s go and get changed.”

The Slytherins continued to chant as they trailed back into the changing rooms.

“How was practice?” asked Hermione rather coolly half an hour later, as Harry and Ron climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

“It was —” Harry began.

“Completely lousy,” said Ron in a hollow voice, sinking into a chair beside Hermione. She looked up at Ron and her frostiness seemed to melt.

“Well, it was only your first one,” she said consolingly, “it’s bound to take

time to —”

“Who said it was me who made it lousy?” snapped Ron.

“No one,” said Hermione, looking taken aback, “I thought —”

“You thought I was bound to be rubbish?”

“No, of course I didn’t! Look, you said it was lousy so I just —”

“I’m going to get started on some homework,” said Ron angrily and stomped off to the staircase to the boys’ dormitories and vanished from sight. Hermione turned to Harry.

“Was he lousy?”

“No,” said Harry loyally.

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose he could’ve played better,” Harry muttered, “but it was only the first training session, like you said . . .”

Neither Harry nor Ron seemed to make much headway with their homework that night. Harry knew Ron was too preoccupied with how badly he had performed at Quidditch practice and he himself was having difficulty in getting the chant of “*Gryffindor are losers*” out of his head.

They spent the whole of Sunday in the common room, buried in their books while the room around them filled up, then emptied: It was another clear, fine day and most of their fellow Gryffindors spent the day out in the grounds, enjoying what might well be some of the last sunshine that year. By the evening Harry felt as though somebody had been beating his brain against the inside of his skull.

“You know, we probably should try and get more homework done during the week,” Harry muttered to Ron, as they finally laid aside Professor McGonagall’s long essay on the *Inanimatus Conjurus* spell and turned miserably to Professor Sinistra’s equally long and difficult essay about Jupiter’s moons.

“Yeah,” said Ron, rubbing slightly bloodshot eyes and throwing his fifth spoiled bit of parchment into the fire beside them. “Listen . . . shall we just

ask Hermione if we can have a look at what she's done?"

Harry glanced over at her; she was sitting with Crookshanks on her lap and chatting merrily to Ginny as a pair of knitting needles flashed in midair in front of her, now knitting a pair of shapeless elf socks.

"No," he said heavily, "you know she won't let us."

And so they worked on while the sky outside the windows became steadily darker; slowly, the crowd in the common room began to thin again. At half-past eleven, Hermione wandered over to them, yawning.

"Nearly done?"

"No," said Ron shortly.

"Jupiter's biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto," she said, pointing over Ron's shoulder at a line in his Astronomy essay, "and it's Io that's got the volcanos."

"Thanks," snarled Ron, scratching out the offending sentences.

"Sorry, I only —"

"Yeah, well, if you've just come over here to criticize —"

"Ron —"

"I haven't got time to listen to a sermon, all right, Hermione, I'm up to my neck in it here —"

"No — look!"

Hermione was pointing to the nearest window. Harry and Ron both looked over. A handsome screech owl was standing on the windowsill, gazing into the room at Ron.

"Isn't that Hermes?" said Hermione, sounding amazed.

"Blimey, it is!" said Ron quietly, throwing down his quill and getting to his feet. "What's Percy writing to me for?"

He crossed to the window and opened it; Hermes flew inside, landed upon Ron's essay, and held out a leg to which a letter was attached. Ron took it off

and the owl departed at once, leaving inky footprints across Ron's drawing of the moon Io.

"That's definitely Percy's handwriting," said Ron, sinking back into his chair and staring at the words on the outside of the scroll: *To Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts*. He looked up at the other two. "What d'you reckon?"

"Open it!" said Hermione eagerly. Harry nodded.

Ron unrolled the scroll and began to read. The farther down the parchment his eyes traveled, the more pronounced became his scowl. When he had finished reading, he looked disgusted. He thrust the letter at Harry and Hermione, who leaned toward each other to read it together:

Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minister of Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect.

I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have always been afraid that you would take what we might call the "Fred and George" route, rather than following in my footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility.

But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternization with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this — no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore's favorite — but I feel bound to tell you that

Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different — and probably more accurate — view of Potter's behavior. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a good idea of the way the wind is blowing — and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school too. As you must be aware, given that our father escorted him to court, Potter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and he did not come out of it looking too good. He got off on a mere technicality if you ask me and many of the people I've spoken to remain convinced of his guilt.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter — I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent — but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter's behavior that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a really delightful woman, who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that so far Professor Umbridge is encountering very little cooperation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week — again, see the Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this — a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticize our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore (if you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore's, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the

Ministry. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of petty criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders). I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of association with such people — the Minister really could not be more gracious to me — and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents' beliefs and actions either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realize how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter, and congratulations again on becoming prefect.

Your brother,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Percy".

Harry looked up at Ron.

“Well,” he said, trying to sound as though he found the whole thing a joke, “if you want to — er — what is it?” (He checked Percy’s letter.) “Oh yeah — ‘sever ties’ with me, I swear I won’t get violent.”

“Give it back,” said Ron, holding out his hand. “He is —” Ron said jerkily, tearing Percy’s letter in half, “the world’s” — he tore it into quarters — “biggest” — he tore it into eighths — “*git*.” He threw the pieces into the fire.

“Come on, we’ve got to get this finished some time before dawn,” he said briskly to Harry, pulling Professor Sinistra’s essay back toward him.

Hermione was looking at Ron with an odd expression on her face.

“Oh, give them here,” she said abruptly.

“What?” said Ron.

“Give them to me, I’ll look through them and correct them,” she said.

“Are you serious? Ah, Hermione, you’re a lifesaver,” said Ron, “what can I — ?”

“What you can say is, ‘We promise we’ll never leave our homework this

late again,” she said, holding out both hands for their essays, but she looked slightly amused all the same.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” said Harry weakly, passing over his essay and sinking back into his armchair, rubbing his eyes.

It was now past midnight and the common room was deserted but for the three of them and Crookshanks. The only sound was that of Hermione’s quill scratching out sentences here and there on their essays and the ruffle of pages as she checked various facts in the reference books strewn across the table. Harry was exhausted. He also felt an odd, sick, empty feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the letter now curling blackly in the heart of the fire.

He knew that half the people inside Hogwarts thought him strange, even mad; he knew that the *Daily Prophet* had been making snide allusions to him for months, but there was something about seeing it written down like that in Percy’s writing, about knowing that Percy was advising Ron to drop him and even to tell tales on him to Umbridge, that made his situation real to him as nothing else had. He had known Percy for four years, had stayed in his house during the summers, shared a tent with him during the Quidditch World Cup, had even been awarded full marks by him in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament last year, yet now, Percy thought him unbalanced and possibly violent.

And with a surge of sympathy for his godfather, Harry thought that Sirius was probably the only person he knew who could really understand how he felt at the moment, because Sirius was in the same situation; nearly everyone in the Wizarding world thought Sirius a dangerous murderer and a great Voldemort supporter and he had had to live with that knowledge for fourteen years. . . .

Harry blinked. He had just seen something in the fire that could not have been there. It had flashed into sight and vanished immediately. No . . . it could not have been. . . . He had imagined it because he had been thinking about Sirius. . . .

“Okay, write that down,” Hermione said to Ron, pushing his essay and a

sheet covered in her own writing back to Ron, “and then copy out this conclusion that I’ve written for you.”

“Hermione, you are honestly the most wonderful person I’ve ever met,” said Ron weakly, “and if I’m ever rude to you again —”

“— I’ll know you’re back to normal,” said Hermione. “Harry, yours is okay except for this bit at the end, I think you must have misheard Professor Sinistra, Europa’s covered in *ice*, not mice — Harry?”

Harry had slid off his chair onto his knees and was now crouching on the singed and threadbare hearthrug, gazing into the flames.

“Er — Harry?” said Ron uncertainly. “Why are you down there?”

“Because I’ve just seen Sirius’s head in the fire,” said Harry.

He spoke quite calmly; after all, he had seen Sirius’s head in this very fire the previous year and talked to it too. Nevertheless, he could not be sure that he had really seen it this time. . . . It had vanished so quickly. . . .

“Sirius’s head?” Hermione repeated. “You mean like when he wanted to talk to you during the Triwizard Tournament? But he wouldn’t do that now, it would be too — *Sirius!*”

She gasped, gazing at the fire; Ron dropped his quill. There in the middle of the dancing flames sat Sirius’s head, long dark hair falling around his grinning face.

“I was starting to think you’d go to bed before everyone else had disappeared,” he said. “I’ve been checking every hour.”

“You’ve been popping into the fire every hour?” Harry said, half laughing.

“Just for a few seconds to check if the coast was clear yet.”

“But what if you’d been seen?” said Hermione anxiously.

“Well, I think a girl — first year by the look of her — might’ve got a glimpse of me earlier, but don’t worry,” Sirius said hastily, as Hermione clapped a hand to her mouth. “I was gone the moment she looked back at me and I’ll bet she just thought I was an oddly shaped log or something.”

“But Sirius, this is taking an awful risk —” Hermione began.

“You sound like Molly,” said Sirius. “This was the only way I could come up with of answering Harry’s letter without resorting to a code — and codes are breakable.”

At the mention of Harry’s letter, Hermione and Ron had both turned to stare at him.

“You didn’t say you’d written to Sirius!” said Hermione accusingly.

“I forgot,” said Harry, which was perfectly true; his meeting with Cho in the Owlery had driven everything before it out of his mind. “Don’t look at me like that, Hermione, there was no way anyone would have got secret information out of it, was there, Sirius?”

“No, it was very good,” said Sirius, smiling. “Anyway, we’d better be quick, just in case we’re disturbed — your scar.”

“What about — ?” Ron began, but Hermione said quickly, “We’ll tell you afterward, go on, Sirius.”

“Well, I know it can’t be fun when it hurts, but we don’t think it’s anything to really worry about. It kept aching all last year, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, and Dumbledore said it happened whenever Voldemort was feeling a powerful emotion,” said Harry, ignoring, as usual, Ron and Hermione’s winces. “So maybe he was just, I dunno, really angry or something the night I had that detention.”

“Well, now he’s back it’s bound to hurt more often,” said Sirius.

“So you don’t think it had anything to do with Umbridge touching me when I was in detention with her?” Harry asked.

“I doubt it,” said Sirius. “I know her by reputation and I’m sure she’s no Death Eater —”

“She’s foul enough to be one,” said Harry darkly and Ron and Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement.

“Yes, but the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters,” said Sirius with a wry smile. “I know she’s a nasty piece of work, though — you

should hear Remus talk about her.”

“Does Lupin know her?” asked Harry quickly, remembering Umbridge’s comments about dangerous half-breeds during her first lesson.

“No,” said Sirius, “but she drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation two years ago that makes it almost impossible for him to get a job.”

Harry remembered how much shabbier Lupin looked these days and his dislike of Umbridge deepened even further.

“What’s she got against werewolves?” said Hermione angrily.

“Scared of them, I expect,” said Sirius, smiling at her indignation. “Apparently she loathes part-humans; she campaigned to have merpeople rounded up and tagged last year too. Imagine wasting your time and energy persecuting merpeople when there are little toerags like Kreacher on the loose —”

Ron laughed but Hermione looked upset.

“Sirius!” she said reproachfully. “Honestly, if you made a bit of an effort with Kreacher I’m sure he’d respond, after all, you are the only member of his family he’s got left, and Professor Dumbledore said —”

“So what are Umbridge’s lessons like?” Sirius interrupted. “Is she training you all to kill half-breeds?”

“No,” said Harry, ignoring Hermione’s affronted look at being cut off in her defense of Kreacher. “She’s not letting us use magic at all!”

“All we do is read the stupid textbook,” said Ron.

“Ah, well, that figures,” said Sirius. “Our information from inside the Ministry is that Fudge doesn’t want you trained in combat.”

“*Trained in combat?*” repeated Harry incredulously. “What does he think we’re doing here, forming some sort of wizard army?”

“That’s exactly what he thinks you’re doing,” said Sirius, “or rather, that’s exactly what he’s afraid Dumbledore’s doing — forming his own private army, with which he will be able to take on the Ministry of Magic.”

There was a pause at this, then Ron said, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, including all the stuff that Luna Lovegood comes out with.”

“So we’re being prevented from learning Defense Against the Dark Arts because Fudge is scared we’ll use spells against the Ministry?” said Hermione, looking furious.

“Yep,” said Sirius. “Fudge thinks Dumbledore will stop at nothing to seize power. He’s getting more paranoid about Dumbledore by the day. It’s a matter of time before he has Dumbledore arrested on some trumped-up charge.”

This reminded Harry of Percy’s letter.

“D’you know if there’s going to be anything about Dumbledore in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow? Only Ron’s brother Percy reckons there will be —”

“I don’t know,” said Sirius, “I haven’t seen anyone from the Order all weekend, they’re all busy. It’s just been Kreacher and me here . . .”

There was a definite note of bitterness in Sirius’s voice.

“So you haven’t had any news about Hagrid, either?”

“Ah . . .” said Sirius, “well, he was supposed to be back by now, no one’s sure what’s happened to him.” Then, seeing their stricken faces, he added quickly, “But Dumbledore’s not worried, so don’t you three get yourselves in a state; I’m sure Hagrid’s fine.”

“But if he was supposed to be back by now . . .” said Hermione in a small, worried voice.

“Madame Maxime was with him, we’ve been in touch with her and she says they got separated on the journey home — but there’s nothing to suggest he’s hurt or — well, nothing to suggest he’s not perfectly okay.”

Unconvinced, Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged worried looks.

“Listen, don’t go asking too many questions about Hagrid,” said Sirius hastily, “it’ll just draw even more attention to the fact that he’s not back, and I know Dumbledore doesn’t want that. Hagrid’s tough, he’ll be okay.” And when they did not appear cheered by this, Sirius added, “When’s your next Hogsmeade weekend anyway? I was thinking, we got away with the dog

disguise at the station, didn't we? I thought I could —"

"NO!" said Harry and Hermione together, very loudly.

"Sirius, didn't you see the *Daily Prophet*?" said Hermione anxiously.

"Oh that," said Sirius, grinning, "they're always guessing where I am, they haven't really got a clue —"

"Yeah, but we think this time they have," said Harry. "Something Malfoy said on the train made us think he knew it was you, and his father was on the platform, Sirius — you know, Lucius Malfoy — so don't come up here, whatever you do, if Malfoy recognizes you again —"

"All right, all right, I've got the point," said Sirius. He looked most displeased. "Just an idea, thought you might like to get together —"

"I would, I just don't want you chucked back in Azkaban!" said Harry.

There was a pause in which Sirius looked out of the fire at Harry, a crease between his sunken eyes.

"You're less like your father than I thought," he said finally, a definite coolness in his voice. "The risk would've been what made it fun for James."

"Look —"

"Well, I'd better get going, I can hear Kreacher coming down the stairs," said Sirius, but Harry was sure he was lying. "I'll write to tell you a time I can make it back into the fire, then, shall I? If you can stand to risk it?"

There was a tiny *pop*, and the place where Sirius's head had been was flickering flame once more.